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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the use of ethnographic biography as a source of information and reflection for student teachers. Ethnographic methods combine observation of a subject's teaching environment or context, examining the present rather than the past. Information can then be made available to student teachers in need of a personal viewpoint on teaching to complement that which they learn in school. By offering student teachers the opportunity to make biographies of other teachers about their shared profession, not only they but experienced teachers as well can discover patterns of experience in relation to school culture, thereby enabling novices to take a more realistic view of teaching. The study described here is a model offered to student teachers in Fribourg (Switzerland) near their final semester of course work. It is a student-centered approach to critical ethnography that reveals biographical dimensions of both the expert teachers who are the focus of the ethnographic research and the student teachers who are conducting the research. The resulting narratives reveal common concerns, anxieties, sorrows, prejudices, and presuppositions, and they offer a way of bringing more context into student teachers' teaching curriculum. (Contains 45 references.) (LL)

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ETHNOGRAPHY OF BIOGRAPHY: STUDENT TEACHERS REFLECTING ON "LIFE-STORIES" OF EXPERIENCED TEACHERS

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(This paper is one in a series of five in a Division D-symposium on "Biography-taking -- Biography-making: Qualitative Approaches")

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Ethnography of Biography

The purpose of this paper/article is to explore an aspect of the idea of biography as a source of information and reflection. The type of biography that I will deal with here is what I call the "ethnographic biography."

I use the term ethnographic biography to describe a method for collecting biographical information about teachers - both expert and student teachers - using ethnographic methods. These methods basically combine close protocolled observation of a subject's teaching environment or *context* and detailed interviews designed to explore reasons behind the events and actions. Biography-taking that is ethnographic in its purpose wishes to examine the present rather than to uncover the past. Spradley (1980, p. 3) has described it as: "Rather than studying people, ethnography means learning from people." Rather than explaining what is happening (which often risks missing out on what is really going on) ethnography asks for *descriptions*. Inventive powers are directed towards representation of cultural settings (Anderson, 1989; Cazden & Mehan, 1989; Woods, 1986).

Biography, from the Greek *bios* life, deals with accounts of people's lives; ethnography, on the other hand, is concerned with *ethnikos*, or culture. By combining *bios* with *ethnikos*, we can make a subset that is an account of a person's life with the context of the culture (Agar, 1986; Erickson & Schultz, 1981; Geertz, 1983). If we accept the premise that schools are indeed cultural settings then ethnographic biography offers an

excellent method for discovering the unique and the common experiences of the teachers who are a part of it (Dick, 1992). The use of ethnography in teacher education can enable preservice teachers to render their teaching experience as text and document, interpret contradictions as they unfold, and give voice to their teaching struggles in order to become conscious agents in their pedagogy (Britzman, 1989; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Elliott, 1990; Griffiths, 1985; Grimmett & Erickson, 1988; Handal & Lauvås, 1987; Richert, 1987; Veal, Clift & Holland, 1989).

In turn, this information can be made available to student teachers in need of a personal viewpoint of teaching to complement that which they learn in school. It is what Brown, Collins & Duguid (1989) call "situated cognition and the culture of learning" (cf. also Carr, 1991; Vosniadou & Brewer, 1987). Pedagogical events serve thus as experienced curriculum which is embedded in the reality of classroom teaching and in the reconstructing "sense-making" of it (Doyle, 1992).

Finding ways to provide our student teachers with *context* is a continuing challenge in teacher education. Most student teachers start their first teaching job still wondering how. What they learned in school (Barnes, 1989; Carter, 1990; for an overview, see Reynolds, 1992) is supposed to be woven into the complex web of variables that they face when immersed in the real school culture (Lyons, 1990; Zeichner & Grant, 1981). By offering student teachers the opportunity to make biographies of other teachers about their shared profession, not only they, but the experienced teacher as well can discover patterns of experience in relation to school culture that can help the novice teachers take a more realistic view of teaching. At the same time, experienced teachers find insight on their

own success or difficulty in integrating all the diverse facets involved in teaching (Mezirow, 1990).

The study that I describe here is a model offered to student teachers near their final semester of course work of a three and a half year Teacher Education Program for secondary school teachers in Fribourg, Switzerland. It is a student-centered approach to critical ethnography that reveals biographical dimensions of both the expert teachers, who are the focus of the ethnographic research, and the student teachers who are conducting the research. The resulting narratives -- which include interview and shadowing transcripts, teacher portraits,-- reveal common concerns, anxieties, sorrows, prejudices, and presuppositions.

Lives in Context

The teacher ethnographic biography course described takes place for one semester or a period of twelve weeks. Within this period, students accomplish an admirable amount of work and maintain a high level of interest and engagement in spite of their initial hesitations. This is a sign that the content of the course really means something to them. The first class usually begins with a description of ethnography and what it is for followed by a discussion of the classroom as a culture and what it means to view something as an ethnographer -- to make the "familiar" strange. At the end, I give the students suggestions regarding teachers that they can contact, allowing them to proceed as they prefer. At the second session I distribute the first long set of interview questions and we read

them together and discuss them thoroughly. Students are encouraged to elaborate or add any additional questions, but not to delete any. The content of these first interview questions range from "What happens?" as *the* ethnographic question to "What memories does this bring back to my mind?" or "Do my expectations get to the surface?" Carr (1991) calls the function of those very simple questions one of 'speculative instruments,' apparently scratching the surface but actually probing quite deeply into the implicit beliefs and knowledge held by the student teachers. The purpose is to primarily lay the groundwork for the classroom shadowing and follow-up interviews. After the first two sessions, I tend to have more personal contact with the students, guiding them and aiding them in their work rather than formal classroom meetings.

After the first interview, the students are instructed to spend one half day in the teacher's classroom shadowing them and carefully noting the circumstances of the class, the activities, the flow, the atmosphere, and any critical incidents that occur. These notes are then carefully transcribed by the students and used as a basis for their second set of interview questions. For the second interview, I provide students with types of questions to ask rather than specific questions.

After the second interview is conducted and transcribed, students begin the final and most important activity of the course: the preparation of the teacher portrait. For this, I encourage them to spend a couple of days reflecting on the teacher that they shadowed in order to synthesize the large amount of information they have gathered. I also encourage them to go back and make a third interview in order to clarify points, actions, or behaviors that they might have noticed. Although this third interview

is optional, it is surprising how many students actually want to go meet with "their" expert teacher again. In fact, many students have remarked that they felt a certain sadness at the thought of the relationship with the teacher coming to an end. The final portrait provides thus more than a portrait of the professional practitioner at work because the student teachers combine their systematic information-gathering approach with the personal expression of "emic" or meaning that the episodes or practice had.

As the student teachers construct their biographical narratives, they are participating as learners in a process and as observers and learners of the process (that is the instructional and educational practice) that they will later manage themselves. From a reflexive view, on one level, the learning is about the classroom management and educational theories of the participating experienced teachers. On a second level, the learning is about teachers as they teach, think, and live within situational limitations. A third level centers on the role of the teacher in such a collaborative effort as school. In order to make some of this multileveled process visible to the students, I asked them to try and clarify underlying beliefs that they might have sensed, either on the part of the expert teacher, or of themselves. This gave the students a chance to re-view their own subjective theories, an accommodation that they were able to carry out within the zones of their proximal development. Thus, this "biography-making" turns out to actually also have a good dose of "biography-taking" in it.

Four Stages of an 'Ethnographer-in-the-Making'

Through this course I have had the pleasure of watching student teachers develop from, what I term, the naive ethnographer and simple learner to the facile and almost trained learner (see also Coe, 1992, on different levels of knowing in ethnographic inquiry). In doing so, they pass through four fairly distinct stages, as evidenced by both the questions they develop and the reflections that they make. I would like to briefly describe these stages here because I think that there are parallels to other types of learning.

In the first stage, that of the (1) "naive-ethnographer-and-simple-learner," student teachers are primarily concerned with identifying dualisms, relating things to themselves, and anxiously wondering how to reach the goal (which they are also nervously trying to define) in as little time as possible. In other words, the "naive ethnographer" is not one to appreciate the complexity of the setting or the experience offered because he is too busy looking for explicit answers that will support rather implicit presuppositions. At this stage, student teachers report events such as the following:

"I imagined a lively, blond haired woman (why blond hair? he asks himself) who would have a similar style to my own....As I opened the door, she stood in front of me. Grazia's (the teacher's first name) style of dressing appeared rather unusual or to use other words, hippie. In any

case, she seemed to be more different from me than I had expected." (Gilbert in his Portrait of Grazia, GG#2).

Or another student, who, after noticing the orderly office of his "subject," complete with computer, multiline telephone, dictaphone, and file cabinets, notes:

"Personally I could not work like this, without some escape where I could spread myself out, especially when you have to be in a classroom all day." (Jakob of Erich, JE#1).

As the ethnographic process slowly progresses, the naive ethnographer begins to notice that questions other than the ones he is asking could be answered. This leads to the second phase, or what I have called the stage of the (2) "novice ethnographer." At this stage, relationships and interconnectedness between situative, thematical, and personal elements suddenly become interesting. The student teachers notice complications such as the possibility that establishing quick friendly contact with "their" experienced teacher in no way means that they already have clear data. Questions and goals become less clear as their perception of events become more sensitive. An excerpt from a student teacher's transcription indicates this shift.

The experienced teacher had been asked what he thought about change --change in schools, change as a teacher. He replied with a long answer, as follows:

"... First of all, let's take the case of industry: They try something new, a new production method, but it doesn't work. At this point, they no longer have the possibility to revitalize a method that they used 20 years ago. Instead, they're obliged to continue searching for a new method so that they can fulfill their contract. In school it's exactly the reverse. There's didactics and methodology. You try something new and when it isn't suitable, or when the teacher thinks that it isn't suitable, then (s)he goes back to old behavior that he learned on his own or behavior that he observed from one of his own teachers. And that's what we always have in schools. The teacher has his own childhood school experience and whenever something "doesn't work" anymore, he reverts to that.

I think that when something doesn't work, we shouldn't search for an answer in the past but in the future. Otherwise what happens is that didactics turns into a "crisis science:" Didactics is done only because something didn't "work." But didactics is supposed to be used to make things work better. Except for learning materials, very little has effectively changed in schools. For example, when you compare a French lesson with one from 20 or 30 years ago, I think there's been a huge improvement. But the improvement is not primarily the teacher. It's the book authors."

To which the student teacher responded by writing down the following comment as an aside in his transcript:

"The interviewer can only speculate as to why teachers are so uninnovative. Is it their "civil servant" mentality? Their isolation in the

classroom? Their lack of cooperation? Or is it the overload in the lesson plan; the hesitant readiness and heaviness of the state's response in school matters? In any case, Johannes' words call for attention. He pulls out one problem, that of progress in schools due to schoolbook authors. But with that, he unintentionally pulls at a whole "rat's tail" of further problems in the realm of structure and of professional psychology." (Hugo, portrait Johannes, HJ#12).

At this point in the ethnography, the experienced teacher is also involved in the process and so the work continues to proceed and unfold itself, leading the student teacher into the third stage, what I call the **(3)** "serious 'pupil' and ethnographic learner."

At this stage the actors rather than the actions become of primary interest. The student teachers focus much more on what the experienced teacher, and indirectly the pupils, the parents and colleagues, perceive as being important. This is an important step because it implies that the student teachers are leaving their predefined ideas about what is supposed to happen both in an ethnography and in teaching and instead focus on what is actually being said (or done). Student teachers realize that simple questions do not always have simple answers. It is also at this stage where ethical questions or themes come up, such as having access to privileged information, mutual trust, and so on.

The same student teacher as in stage 2 expressed this idea as follows in his portrait of the experienced teacher:

"A complete man:

I chose this subtitle not out of pathos. In describing Johannes I admit to having a lot of trouble finding an appropriate beginning; it's difficult even though he is an approachable, almost hearty person. But how to begin?

The primary impression of him is wavery, a feeling. Johannes for me is a person who stands with both feet on the ground, sturdy, rooted, and yet still bendable. He reminds me neither of an oak tree that breaks in the storm nor of the willow trees that bend to the ground. He is rather a meadow that unites both qualities. I think that Johannes has a strong will; he knows where he feels content and how he can get what he wants. An almost untrickable instinct for what is right and responsible goes along with his will. It is an instinct that seems not to have misled him in his up-to-now full life. This instinct for what's right, a sort of inner compass that always shows a similar direction, paired with a strong will is what has made it possible for him to have changed directions in his life more than once; and no one has been immune from it not repeating itself, least of all himself. - I ask myself, where am I in that journey of process, which direction am I heading at?" ((Hugo, portrait Johannes, J#15)

Notice how the descriptive narrative leads into a fundamental question about his own professional development. Almost all students eventually reach the point where the ethnographic work seems to become somehow "natural" or to flow by itself. This fourth stage I have called the

(4) "facile-and-almost-trained learner." It is also at this point that many student teachers realize that their inquiry, as well as the relationship that they have had with the expert teacher, is coming to an end. This realization has a certain domino effect: the student teachers felt an inner emancipation that leads to certain, as yet unanswered or diffuse, questions or themes to suddenly take on a clarity that in turn allows them to finish their final interviews with much more precise questions asked in a much more relaxed way than at the beginning. This stage is also marked by the student teachers' ability for introspection and self-observation. In short, they are able to view the complexity of classroom and school situations in an increasingly differentiated way without losing sight of the fine balance needed between the fragility of some elements of the situation and the incredible strength of others.

One student teacher demonstrated this level of ability in the following excerpt from his teacher portrait:

> *"The goal of Heribert's teaching is to focus on the students. I think this is not an easy task, since I have had the experience of going over the pupils in a class without really wanting to. As a beginning teacher I am often tempted to deal with the students as a whole rather than as individuals -- which is absolutely the teacher's duty. Heribert, on the other hand, perceives each student as an individual and not as a machine to be filled up. I can't forget his quote of Pestalozzi:* ***"Never compare a child with other children, compare it only with itself!"*** *This is amazing, this sets an example for me." (Klaus of Heribert in final portrait, KH#5)*

Spiral of Learning, Spiral of Life

This last quote may illustrate the potential for reflection that the creation of such ethnographic biographies can offer. From the first nervous telephone call, where the students are worried (much as a beginning teacher is worried) about whether they will like their experienced teacher, whether they will feel similar (and hence, at ease) or different from them, to the final synthesis of a well thought out and reflective portrait of themselves as much as of their experienced teacher, the student teachers participating in this journey of inquiry show the potential for situated learning. They experience first hand the "self-doubt" that ethnography can lead to. The process of ethnographic research is filled with uncertainty, risk, and sometimes discomfort for the teachers-as-researchers (Weinstein-Shr, 1990), and the reward is only sensed towards the end.

However, in most cases it is not a linear development, as my description of the four stages of a beginning ethnographer imply. In reality, their pages and pages of interviews and descriptions show more of a spiral development. They are nervous before the first meeting, it goes well, they relax, they reflect. Then they are confronted with the next encounter and again they revert to very self-centered questions. That step completed, they have time to digest a bit, to reflect, and again to develop their thinking. With the next new encounter or crisis in view, they again revert to a rather self-centered position. However, each time they are

able to view the situation in more of its complexity, including their own presuppositions with more objectivity.

I think that it is exactly this upward reaching spiral that is the hallmark of self-constructed learning. The student teachers learn to recognize learning as a dynamic and socially constructed event rather than as a set of static facts. The extension of this idea is that student teachers also learn to think of teaching as an ethical and moral endeavor instead of simply as a craft or a technique. It is this view of teaching that enables novice teachers to begin to see the larger picture of classrooms and schools as places of culture as well as the greater context of education within society.

I would like to cite one last time from a student's concluding portrait of his teacher. Obviously I have chosen it not because this student is an ordinary one, but because he was an exceptional one in his ability to express with written words what other students must have also felt but were unable to express:

"I like to compare the different aspects of a human being with the picture of an arched doorway. Every stone represents one characteristic of a person and at the same time represents a characteristic that holds the whole thing together, that gives both meaning and support. Take one of these "end stones" out and the whole arch threatens to collapse. If this happens, the catastrophe of a collapse can only be avoided with extreme strength, with help from outside, and clever supporting constructions. In Johannes' case, I feel like that stones are especially well braced and

I ask myself which stone is the end stone."(Hugo, portrait of Johannes, HJ#8)

This last quote illustrates another aspect of this research - that of the quality of the writing of the case study done by the students. Lincoln & Guba (1990, p. 55f.) outlined the criteria for a good narrative as follows: it has power and elegance; it is creative; open and problematic; it is independent; it should demonstrate the writer's emotional and intellectual commitment to craftsmanship; and it should display egalitarianism. Needless to say that not all the narratives displayed all those criteria in an equal way. Nevertheless, the student teachers seem to experience what Lightfoot (1983) described so beautifully:

"One searches for coherence, for bringing order to phenomena that people may experience as chaotic or unrelated. The search has the quality of an investigation (...) What evolves is a piece of writing that conveys the tone, style and tempo of the school environment as well as its more static structures and behavioral processes." (p. 15f.).

Biographical Validity

What is on the validity of biographical ethnography? According to King (1991) (who is referring to Dippo,1990), validity (which can be loosely interpreted as value) for critical ethnographies is a function of

the reflexive utility that the study or project has for the participants. For him reflexive utility becomes a powerful and necessary construct for this form of endeavor as research. It does not therefore necessitate a measured amount of change in participant behavior. Rather, it refers to perceived opportunities for reflexive self-analysis, which may or may not lead to participant change (Trumbull, 1990), depending on both personal (Peshkin, 1982) and contextual constraints. More specifically:

> "There are ... safeguards put into place to protect against inquiry becoming no more than the espousal of personal biases. Chief among these has been the development of concepts such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to parallel rationalistic concepts such as (respectively) internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). Since naturalistic inquiry is fundamentally different from rationalist approaches, it should be remembered that it cannot always be judged by the same standards." (Shaker, 1990, p. 358).[1]

While ethnographic biography as a research tool clearly needs some form of validity check, I agree with Bruner (1986) that we still know "precious little" about this form of thinking. It is clearly a distinctly different way of constructing experience, and thus must have "its own criteria of well-formedness" (pp. 11f.).

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[1]Guba, E. C., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1982). Effective evaluation. San Francisco, Ca: Jossey Bass.

In summary, this article has reported on a way of bringing more context into student teachers teaching curriculum. By learning ethnography as a way of discovering the biography of an experienced teacher, they discover some of their own biography as well: Biography as a way of discovering patterns of experience in relation to society, ethnography as a way of discovering the context and culture of the experience. By learning to observe others, we learn to observe ourselves. By learning to make self-observation a way of life, we learn to make learning a way of life for those we teach. This seems to me to be one of the most important goals for children, that they be constant learners. Who can teach children to be constant learners except someone who has learned to be a constant learner himself?

The central message, therefore, is that the study of student teachers and experienced teachers - experiencing the curriculum of teaching and the everyday pedagogy jointly in an ethnographic process - must be grounded in teaching events and in the biography of both of them. If we understand more fully the structure and operating processes of these life-events and the ways in which interpretations of student teachers and experienced teachers contribute to and are shaped by their participation in these "life-stories," we will be able to reformulate notions of teaching in particular and of teacher education in general.

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